

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

40 years on

In December this year our Newsletter will celebrate its 40th birthday, for the first cyclostyled monthly issue was brought out in December 1959. It is a shame that I do not have the first issue in my file (in fact there are vast gaps in my collection). S. Subramanya, Aasheesh Pittie & Kumar Ghorpade have helped by listing and asking for the missing issues, but not with much success as far as I know.

Looking back, mentally, on these first issues indicates the distance the Newsletter has covered. In those early years there was considerable excitement in the Editorial Office when a schoolboy reported that there were two kinds of crows in his garden, one with a grey neck and one with a black one. Now it would be difficult for the Editor to print such a piece in spite of the complaint from one reader that the Newsletter caters to the lowest common denominator, and more erudition is called for.

But let me assure the novices that our Newsletter will always have some space for them. I was delighted to hear from Ramachandra Guha, now a celebrity and the author of several books, including co-authorship with Madhav Gadgil in *This Fissured Land*, that as a school boy of eleven, his very first article to be published was in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers. I wish I could lay my hands on that one.

I might mention here that the NLBW faced rough weather when it was conceived. Members of the Executive Committee of the BNHS protested that if the Birdwatchers Field Club of India was formed, and if the Newsletter was published it would reduce the already low membership of the BNHS. I held the contrary view (and was proved right) that birdwatchers would join the BWFCI, subscribe to the NL and then as their interest developed they would join the BNHS as well. Salim Ali encouraged me to go ahead with the Newsletter, but the attacks from Executive Committee Members of the BNHS continued. In fact Salim Ali was castigated by the BNHS Committee for having contributed an article to the Newsletter on the WHO/BNHS Bird Migration Project, before it was published in the BNHS Journal. The Journal then was not too punctual, and there were long delays between issues. The Bird Migration Project was a significant development, so where was the harm in publicising it in a monthly created specially to arouse an interest in our birds.

I was surprised at the number of eminent naturalists who so willingly agreed to write for the NL when it was launched. I will name a few who have died, or those with whom we are now not in close touch : Loke Wan Tho, Shivarjkumar of Jaldan, R.S. Dharmakumarsinhji, R.M. Naik, T.J. Roberts, Stewart Melliush, R.S. Fitter, Christopher Savage, Peter Jackson and many more.

I must pay a special tribute to JS Serrao of the BNHS who came to my house in far away Andheri after a hard days work in Bombay to cyclostyle the NL. His phenomenal memory for natural history facts, and ability to lay his hand on appropriate references was admirable. Salim Ali told me that without Serrao's assistance the ten volume Handbook would not have appeared when it did.

To all of them our grateful thanks for having laid the foundations of a publication which I am sure will survive the Founder Editor. I would not like to think of a successor as yet - but will do so in good time, I hope.

A recent ornithological survey at Paunabu Valley of Kalimpong conducted by the Himalayan Nature & Foundation Wing during October last year successfully hunted up more forty five Siberian blue chats with another very rare species called Sultan tit last sighted at Chapramari Sanctuary of Dist. Jalpaiguri and that was in 1947.

So the occurrence of resighting of the two hardly seen species after decades long absence in the sanctuary of North Bengal is extremely noteworthy.

But till date no further study has been done by the Forest Department of West Bengal or Z.S.I of Calcutta to know the ecology and present status of the two rare avians.

As largest and India's most prestigious natural history organisation. BNHS should undertake immediate protection measures with proper long term studies to ascertain the present and future survival of the species in North Bengal. Persons may put individual skill providing useful information on distribution and present status of these "once probably disappeared" birds elsewhere in India.

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THE MYSTERIOUS RAPTORS. K. RAMESH, *Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun 248 001, U.P.*

I wish to support Dr. Asad Rahmani's observation in the last issue of NLBW that the vulture population in North India is fast declining. I have been carrying out my research work on pheasants in the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) for over three years. Raptors in this Park are represented by 11 species which include bearded vulture or lammergeier, *Gypaetus barbatus*, Himalayan griffon *Gyps himalayensis*, griffon vulture *Gyps fulvus* and golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*. All of them were abundant when I landed in GHNP in 1995. Sighting of these species used to be very frequent which indicated a large population. Even in 1996, I used to have an average sighting of 8-10 individuals of lammergeier and golden eagle, besides a large number of griffons in each of my visits to Tirthan valley of GHNP. Suddenly in 1997, they started disappearing and sighting of these birds became rare, which puzzled me. I could not think of any explanation. Drs. Peter Garson and Tony Gaston, who were conducting surveys in this park over 10 years from 1980 to 1991, were also surprised at the absence of raptors when they visited in May 1998. Dr. Gaston even suggested that we have a separate monitoring protocol to keep a watch on these birds. Here our observation in GHNP reveals a decline in population, not only of the vultures, but also of other raptors. When I discussed this with my colleagues at Wildlife Institute of India, I came to know that the case was same even in the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary and other places in the himalayan region. I also had a chat on this issue with Dr. Rahmani during the National Seminar at WII. What surprised me more is the reappearance of the raptors in GHNP. I saw four (including

one subadult) golden eagles and two lammergeiers in Shilt thach and Khoilipoi (within GHNP) respectively in October 1998. I also witnessed a larger flock of 22 griffons hovering just outside GHNP thrice recently in different occasions. During my last field working days in November, I also recorded two lammergeiers and a few himalayan griffons. The reappearance of these raptors forced me the queries, "Is there any migration taking place in the raptors? If so, where do they go?"

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INDIAN SKIMMER IN RAJASTHAN. JATINDER KAUR, *Researcher, Wildlife Institute of India, P.B. No. 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248 001*

I want to add an additional piece of information to the article, published in the Newsletter (Vol. 38 No. 5) entitled "Sightings of Indian skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*) in Rajasthan far from its fluvial (riverine) habitat". This article documents past and recent records of the Indian skimmer in Rajasthan from non-fluvial habitats.

It was interesting to note that the authors never saw more than 5 birds and most of the sightings were restricted to the Chambal river area. During a survey in Bhilwara district on July 6, 1998 for the sarus crane, I counted 7 Indian skimmers over the waters of the Kothari dam in south Rajasthan. The birds were gliding, diving and skimming in classical skimmer style and stayed close to the banks of the reservoir. I was in the area for over 30 minutes and the birds showed no signs of leaving. This bit of information strengthens the case of the authors in classifying Rajasthan as an important state for the species. Most of the records in the article are from east Rajasthan, and my observation suggests that the southern part of the state may be housing a substantial population of this charismatic species.

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BIRDING IN MANNANUR FOREST RANGE, ANDHRA PRADESH. S. ASHOK KUMAR, *IAS (Retd.), Plot No. 491, Road No. 10, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad 500 033*

Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh had a birding trip to Mannanur Forest Range on 22nd November, 1998. In the vegetation hedging the Deccan trap rock cliff near Umamaheswari temple. Yellowthroated bulbuls (*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*) were sighted along with whitebrowed bulbuls (*Pycnonotus luteolus*). The other interesting birds recorded were the whitebellied drongo (*Dicrurus caeruleus*), grey or ashy drongo (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*), Jerdon's chloropsis (*Chloropsis jerdoni*) verditer flycatcher (*Muscicapa thalassina*), large green barbet (*Megalaima zeylanica*), emerald or bronzewing dove (*Chalcophaps indica*).

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